A Postcolonial Passage to England

Michael Ondaatje’s The Cat’s Table

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In his sixth novel, published in 2011, which was nominated for the IMPAC Dublin Literary award in 2013, Michael Ondaatje recalls the journey to England that he undertook in 1954, to reunite with his mother. He proposes a fictional version of it coloured by other places he has known and other memories that inhabit him. The journey becomes a trope for translation in the novel. The Oxford English Dictionary points out that ‘translate’ derives from Middle English and the old French Latin, *translat*, ‘carried across’, the past participle of *transferre*; so etymologically it originally meant ‘to remove from one place to another’. Being part of the maritime idiom, the novel’s title, *The Cat’s Table*, is an invitation to include the text in any discussion of postcolonial migrations and translation dealing with the crossing of, and relocation in, space. The novel’s narrative form, complexity, style, characters, and point of view are some of the many instruments with which the author problematizes journeying as a rite of passage and writing as an itinerant trace of this learning experience which proves to be traumatizing and educative at the same time.

This essay will first deal with the representation of the four dimensions of space–time in Ondaatje’s novel and the power struggles with regard to gender, class, and race that transform the migrant’s gaze; it will go on to examine the place of writing in the becoming-Other of the migrant self. It will also look at the different interpretations of the notion of ‘passage’ in the novel: as alteration, as death or impasse, or, on the contrary, as a possibility of renewal and renaissance, as distance to be crossed or as poetic elevation. Such an analysis will help us understand the mutation of the “post-colonial novel, [...] de-centred, transnational, inter-lingual, cross-cultural,” into a contemporary novel in Ondaatje’s

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literary practice. The transition from the postcolonial moment to the globalization moment in the history of the novel is subtly made by the narrator, whose voice, using the pronoun “we,” speaks in the name of all of us on many occasions and especially at a crucial point in the narrative (157).

Born in 1943 in a country that was then called Ceylon, Ondaatje spent eight years (1954–62) in England before travelling to and settling in Canada. Although his award-winning novel The English Patient pays indirect homage to his English educators (given the fact that he completed his secondary education at Dulwich College), Ondaatje devoted some of his earlier books to the trips he had made back to Sri Lanka. These memoirs (Running in the Family), fiction (Anil’s Ghost), and poems (The Cinnamon Peeler, Handwriting) are quite silent about Ondaatje’s detour via England.

The Cat’s Table opens a door on this hitherto unmentioned period and unveils details of his journey to England. Ondaatje, who is well versed in fictional biographies and autobiographies, experiments here with a new genre of the novel which hovers between travel writing, bildungsroman, adventure novel, detective novel, fictionalized autobiography, autobiographical novel, and autofiction. The way in which the narrator shares the author’s name, the known episode of reunion with his mother, the geographical point of departure (Colombo) and arrival (Tilbury) are quite a few landmarks confirming the fact that what we have here is an autobiographical gesture. The author’s peritextual note at the end of the book specifies that “although the novel sometimes uses the colouring and locations of memoir and autobiography, The Cat’s Table is fictional” (367). In an interview, Ondaatje emphasizes the role of pure invention in the novel. What was supposed to be an innocent tale of children displacing themselves without fear or mystery towards their known destination with the help of a well-charted itinerary is transformed in the course of writing into an adventure novel, by the inclusion of the enigmatic prisoner Niemeyer. The creative tension between truth and lies is a recurrent motif in Ondaatje’s fiction. Truth, which makes its way through many a rumour, ends in the birth of an anecdote; the novel is constructed as a tapestry interwoven with micro-

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